

The Kissinger Transcripts

A selection from recently released material in the National Archives

JAMES WARREN JUNE 2005 ISSUE

Henry Kissinger must be hoping that his own secretly recorded words won't haunt his legacy, as Richard Nixon's haunted his. The two men used different means to preserve their telephone conversations. Nixon installed a voice-activated taping system that caught everything, whereas Kissinger had secretaries listen in on his phone calls, take notes in shorthand, and type them up. But the results were the same: voluminous records clearly intended for private use. In the instances in which Kissinger did tape conversations, he had the tapes (but not the transcripts) destroyed.

Shortly before leaving office, in 1977, Kissinger donated the transcripts to government archives, stipulating that, among other things, none of them be released during his lifetime. But, as with Nixon's recordings, researchers pressed successfully for access to the material. Some 20,000 pages of the transcripts, covering Kissinger's tenure as Nixon's national-security adviser, from 1969 to 1974, and as Nixon's secretary of state, from 1973 to 1974, were opened to the public last year by the National Archives and Records Administration, in College Park, Maryland. They reveal a man of intelligence, charm, and humor—and one exquisitely skilled at using those qualities to manipulate the people around him.

They also demonstrate Kissinger's temper and his extreme sensitivity about his public image.

Herewith excerpts from several of Kissinger's conversations. They have been edited to correct the spelling and punctuation errors rampant in the transcriptions and because of space constraints.

HOLD THAT COMMENT!

Kissinger was perturbed by a story that ran in Women's Wear Daily in May of 1971, in which Kandy Stroud insinuated that he was entertaining guests at an upscale Washington restaurant at the taxpayers' expense. Although the publication had a small circulation (about 85,000) in comparison with its competitors, such as Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, it was the most influential fashion publication at that time, and Stroud was a high-profile society reporter—facts that surely heightened Kissinger's agitation. He called WWD's publisher to complain.

Henry Kissinger and James Brady, May 18, 1971

HK: I was calling about an item which appeared last Thursday ...

JB: The one about your reported expenditures at various restaurants?

HK: I consider that outrageous ... One, I don't have an expense account, and two, I have never charged any meal to the president, and three, the figures are absurd ... I think it is close to being libelous, but I'm not making it a legal case, just an ethical one ...

JB: I would be glad to run a statement from you.

HK: I don't do that.

JB: You don't want to write a statement of clarification?

HK: I think *you* owe *me* one.

JB: Well, I don't know the facts.

HK: Do you think it is a fair thing to suggest without even knowing if I have an expense account? ...

JB: If we had called and said we had a story, and what about it ...

HK: But she [Stroud] didn't do that.

JB: She didn't?

HK: No ... But even if the facts were true, which is absurd, it's my own business.

JB: But it is rather interesting. You are a public figure ...

HK: Straighten out the facts! You go to a maître d' who is trying to build himself up, and I don't then feel it's *my* job to write a letter.

JB: Well, I don't know what the facts are ... I will have to talk with Kandy. I will call you back.

Henry Kissinger and Kandy Stroud, May 18, 1971

HK: Kandy?

KS: Henry, when are you going to take me to dinner?

HK: I want a correction.

KS: What do you mean? ...

HK: On what you wrote on May 13. The idea I would charge the government for lunches or dinners is an outrage.

KS: It was speculation. I said, "I wonder if."

HK: What if you said, "I wonder if he murdered his mother"?

KS: I said, "I wonder if it came out of an expense account."

HK: Furthermore, I have eaten at the Sans Souci five times since February 18 ... You have me there ten times for lunch and frequently for dinner.

KS: I will be happy to publish what you say.

HK: I will not be quoted.

KS: How would you like it printed?

HK: Just say you looked into it and you found it was not true.

KS: What about Paul's [the maître d's] statement?

HK: It's just not true.

KS: You have never taken people on an expense account?

HK: No. I pay it out of my pocket. I am going broke in this job ... It wouldn't be anybody's business if I ate all my meals at the Sans Souci

with six women. But the implication that I would take government money is ...

KS: I will print what you said.

HK: But not quoting.

KS: How do we prove it's not true?

HK: You can say you checked into it and found I do not take government expense money for eating in public restaurants.

KS: Do you have a total of your expense money?

HK: I wouldn't give it to you if I had it. It's my business what I spend on food. But it's ridiculous to say I go eight or ten times a month for lunch to the Sans Souci ... You say I have been there that many times with a tall dirty blonde.

KS: It was a brunette?

HK: That is the sort of gossip I *don't* ask you to correct. But the government money ... For God's sake, this is a point of honor! ...

KS: Can I see you sometime?

HK: You correct it first, and then I will see you.

Henry Kissinger and James Brady, May 18, 1971

JB: I talked to Kandy ... I think it fair for us to run something in our Eye page saying *Women's Wear Daily* has learned that the figures stated

were highly inflated and has also learned that Mr. Kissinger's expenses are handled by himself and not by the government or any government agency.

HK: If you did that, it would meet all my concerns.

MANAGEMENT ADVICE

On September 14, 1971, an account appeared in the press of a meeting in Saigon between General Creighton Abrams, the head of the U.S. military in South Vietnam, and Senator George McGovern, who would run against Nixon in the 1972 election. McGovern told reporters that Abrams had indicated that all U.S. troops would leave Vietnam after a peace treaty was signed. Nixon and Kissinger were furious about what they deemed Abrams's gross indiscretion, and about related Pentagon leaks. That evening Kissinger vented in calls to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and (after speaking with Nixon, who complained that Abrams both drank and talked too much) Admiral Thomas Moorer, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Henry Kissinger and Melvin Laird, September 14, 1971

HK: Mel, I was just talking to the president. We have been reading the *Star* story. We don't know what to do about the Pentagon.

ML: That's just a cheap story!

HK: Pentagon sources.

ML: Did you read my press conference about a week ago?

HK: No. Couldn't everybody just shut up?

ML: You can't get the reporters to shut up.

HK: I don't *mean* the reporters. Who the hell is Abrams to say there will be no residual forces?

ML: McGovern came out of the meeting with Abrams and said [the] Vietnamization program eventually would provide for the total withdrawal ... But no one is talking in the Pentagon. If you are going to take McGovern's—

HK: I don't give a damn about McGovern!

ML: They are absolutely cheap stories ...

HK: If you can just do the maximum to scare your people.

ML: I have done that, but you are going to get these cheap stories ...

HK: I think if you scare your people—

ML: You *can't* scare these people.

HK: Just scare your own people!

Henry Kissinger and Thomas Moorer, September 14, 1971

HK: We have been reading the *Washington Star*. The president and I are just beside ourselves ... the Pentagon story that all troops will be withdrawn, that Abrams comment ...

TM: I don't think he said it.

HK: No military officer is to say one goddamn word about withdrawals!

TM: Right.

HK: They are not to say *anything*—background or on any other basis. The president just called me for the third time, screaming.

TM: I don't think he said it.

HK: The other thing—tell the people in Saigon to shut up! Not just Abrams but the press guys, too.

TM: Fine.

HK: Just fire somebody!

TM: Okay.

MUM'S THE WORD

Kissinger could be coolly duplicitous, as demonstrated by these same-day conversations, about the upcoming presidential election, with the Time columnist Hugh Sidey and with H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff.

Henry Kissinger and Hugh Sidey, September 22, 1972

HS: How are you doing?

HK: Well, we're coming along.

HS: Listen, I'll tell you, we've got a poll coming out next week ... You

know, if I were McGovern, I think I would quit.

HK: Can you tell me what it shows? I won't repeat it.

HS: Yes, incredibly confidentially, because—

HK: Yes, I give you my word I won't.

HS: There are now thirty-nine to forty percentage points difference ... It's sixty-some to—oh, gosh, in the twenties or something like that ...

HK: Amazing.

HS: Yeah ... you might get another lease over there.

Henry Kissinger and H. R. Haldeman, September 22, 1972

HRH: Hi. This is Bob.

HK: Are you on a plane?

HRH: I'm on the ground.

HK: But not an open line?

HRH: No, this is secure.

HK: You probably know it already, and it was given to me as very confidential information. Hugh Sidey called. Just taken a poll. It shows the president thirty-nine points ahead ...

HRH: He didn't say when they would put it out?

HK: He was calling me about something else, so he just dropped it in. I'm not supposed to tell it to anyone. He made me promise.

THOSE HYPOCRITES!

The following conversation, in which Kissinger and Nixon make plans to embarrass the Democrats by disclosing wiretapping activity on the part of Robert F. Kennedy and others, took place against the backdrop of the unfolding Watergate scandal, which would, of course, ultimately reveal that Nixon's secret recording activities were far more extensive than Kennedy's or anyone else's. Kissinger did not realize that he himself was being taped by Nixon, just as Nixon was unaware that Kissinger was having his secretaries document their calls.

Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, June 1, 1973

RN: You had told me that McGeorge Bundy [former national-security adviser to JFK] had the effrontery to tell you that Bobby Kennedy in that period didn't have any taps ... Let's get away from the bullshit. Bobby Kennedy was the greatest tapper—three hundred in 1963—almost three hundred. Two hundred fifty in the rest. And I'm getting the names, and I'm going to publish the names next Thursday ... And let the assholes know that they're going to get this, Henry.

HK: I think you should, absolutely.

RN: Because they have done us in on this thing ... They started it. They want to have a gut fight; they're going to get one ... Now, I want you—now, this is not going to go out till Monday, but leak it to

somebody. Talk to one of your liberal friends and say we've got a blockbuster coming out ...

HK: Certainly I can.

RN: You can say, look, this whole business of tapping, they have really opened it up ... Well, Hoover told me. He said Bobby Kennedy had [been] tapping everybody. I think that even *I'm* on that list.

HK: I wouldn't be surprised.

RN: And so my point—I don't mind, but my point is, I don't want this Goddamn hypocrisy.

HK: Well, if we can get the names, Mr. President, we ought to put some of them out.

RN: Not some, *all* of them! *Everybody* is going to go out. I'm going to put the whole damn list out.

HK: Well, then they'll force us to put all of *ours* out.

RN: Oh, I don't give a damn about that ... Ours will get out anyway ... [And] don't let McGeorge Bundy give you any of that bullshit anymore.

HK: Okay.

RN: It just gets beyond belief!

HELL, NO, HE WON'T GO!

Even as attempts to cover up the Watergate abuses were unraveling, Nixon and his aides appeared oblivious of the extent of the damage. In only a few instances did they acknowledge the possibility of a presidential resignation, and these mentions were fleeting, dismissive, and rife with condescension toward Nixon's opponents.

Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, June 10, 1973

HK: Mr. President, there is no lack of confidence in you whatsoever. The trouble is that some of these Democratic senators ... The problem is these bastard traitors we have in this country.

RN: Don't let this harping discourage you, Henry, you know. You hear from all of these people, and don't let it discourage you.

HK: Mr. President, you and I have been through a lot of things together. It's always the same things, and these bastards are now trying to deprive you of any success. This has nothing to do—

RN: The real problem is this: they're trying to fight over all the things we beat them on. We beat them on China, we beat them on Russia, we beat [them] on the war ...

HK: It has not a thing to do with Watergate. Watergate just enables them to do those things they would have done anyway ...

RN: These people—it is traitorous, isn't it? You've said that often before in that Oval Office, Henry.

HK: And it was true ...

RN: But we've survived before and we can do it again ... Let's face it. If they come in—well, that's a little while off. Let's suppose we—well, I'm not considering resignation, but taking their argument at its best—Nixon and Agnew should resign and the Congress should name a president. It's unbelievable.

HK: Mr. President, a resignation will be a national catastrophe.

RN: It's never going to come ...

HK: I think, Mr. President, what you can do in the remaining three years—

RN: Oh, for crying out loud, when Harry Truman was twenty percent to twenty-three percent in the polls, he was still pulling off Marshall Plans, and that's what we're in for.

HK: Mr. President, you can go down in history as a man who brought about the greatest revolution in American foreign policy ever.

GETTING NAKED WITH ALLEN

Even longtime Nixon chroniclers are puzzled by a conversation Kissinger had with the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg; no evidence exists that the two men even knew each other. However, Kissinger was clearly conscious of the country's left-leaning elites, and no matter how often he badmouthed them to Nixon and others, he occasionally tried to ingratiate himself with—or at least to humor—them. When Ginsberg phoned Kissinger to propose a meeting between members of the administration (including CIA Director Richard Helms) and various peace advocates (Senator Eugene McCarthy,

the antiwar activists Rennie Davis and David Dellinger, and the civil-rights leader Ralph Abernathy), Kissinger took the call.

Henry Kissinger and Allen Ginsberg, April 23, 1971

AG: I am calling at the request partly of Senator McCarthy ... My idea is to arrange a conversation between yourself, Helms, McCarthy, and maybe even Nixon, with Rennie Davis, Dellinger, and Abernathy. It can be done at any time.

HK: I have been meeting with many members representing peace groups, but what I find is that they have always then rushed right out and given the contents of the meeting to the press. But I like to do this, not just for the enlightenment of the people I talk to but to at least give me a feel of what concerned people think. I would be prepared to meet in principle on a private basis.

AG: That's true, but it is a question of personal delicacy. In dealing with human consciences, it is difficult to set limits.

HK: You can't set limits to human consciences, but—

AG: We can try to come to some kind of understanding.

HK: You can set limits to what you say publicly.

AG: It would be even more funny to do it on television.

HK: What?

AG: It would be even more useful if we could do it naked on television.

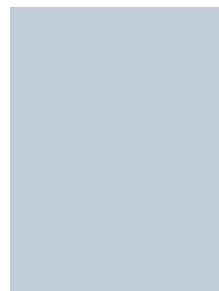
HK: [Laughter]

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